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Dithering on Daniloff

Having tried everything but firmness, President Reagan sent a personal appeal to Mikhail Gorbachev last week, beseeching him to free *U.S. News & World Report* correspondent Nicholas Daniloff. Yesterday Mr. Reagan got his reply. A low-level Soviet official asserted on "Face the Nation," a curious conduit by which to message the president of the United States, that Mr. Danilov would be charged with espionage.

"If you think he is innocent," said Gennadi Gerasimov, a Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman, "we can learn pretty soon, because there is going to be a trial." Then "he can hire a lawyer to help him, and that's it."

The 1963 case of Frederick Barghoorn springs to mind. Professor Barghoorn, too, was framed for espionage — and promptly released when Nikita Khrushchev received a personal request from President Kennedy. But, then, unlike the Reagan administration, the Kennedy administration had not spent the previous week walking on its knees when it ought to have been standing on its feet.

The dithering since Mr. Daniloff's arrest

has been nothing short of astounding, with U.S. policy swinging wildly as public opinion appeared to shift. White House spokesman Larry Speakes captured the simpering spirit of the administration when he worried aloud this week that the Daniloff affair "could have serious implications for U.S.-Soviet relations."

So what will Mr. Reagan do now that his appeal has been spurned? He is said to be thinking about retaliation, but even this unsatisfying assurance is followed quickly by hints that we need to show restraint lest the Russians lose face. This, not Mr. Daniloff's prompt release, is said to be Secretary of State Shultz's gnawing concern.

Mr. Daniloff is threatened with a mock trial before a Soviet court. Ronald Reagan's billet-doux to Mr. Gorbachev is treated with contempt and, in all likelihood, hilarity. How, in such circumstances, can the White House even consider subsidized grain sales to the Soviets, continued arms talks, and a summit conference? Hang Russian face. What about our own?